

An Art of Complexity: Ecology In Practice

The architect Christopher Alexander writes: 'What is *the* single best thing that I can do now, at this moment, to bring the whole to life' (Alexander, C. 1987 p.62).

Maybe it's to offer a poem?

So, to heal the whole
Healing is believing
See within the whole

And in the meantime
In the space of human choice
Paradox conceived

Techno-sapiens
And hothouse bastard bankers
The Minotaur roams

Icons of our dreams
Twix travelers and merchants
Labyrinth of mind

Between dignity
Birth of new reality
Indeterminate

Born of disorder
An unspeakable moment
A matter of chance

Not everyone sees the world as I see the world. That's good, but I suggest that there is a whole area of knowledge, and more important, a whole way of seeing, knowing and doing that for the most part is denied us. As the French philosopher Edgar Morin puts it: 'The modern pathology of mind is in the hyper-simplification that makes us blind to the complexity of reality.' (Morin 2008 p.6)

we must learn not to be afraid of complexity

The potential for complexity and transdisciplinarity are, I argue, not just questions of academic discourse or utopian new ageism, but essential to our survival as a species.

And, 'if you want to achieve something, first consider the opposite'. We humans, particularly those in developed Western societies, are driven by deterministic desires and aspirations to achieve. In this sense, other terms like, 'progress', 'growth', 'prosper' and 'development' join 'control', 'success' and

'power' to support the myth, 'to achieve is to survive'. However, as Donella Meadows pointed out in her essay, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in the System*:

Magical leverage points are not easily accessible, even if we know where they are and which direction to push on them. You have to work at it, whether that means rigorously casting off your own paradigms and throwing yourself into the humility of Not Knowing. In the end, it seems that power has less to do with pushing leverage points than it does with strategically, profoundly, madly letting go (Meadows 1999 p. 19).

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However, resolving the will to achieve is not to dismiss this action completely, but to understand that our society greatly over estimates this masculine, or Yang property over a feminine, or Yin approach. As in the Taijitu symbol seemingly opposite qualities contain elements of the other, and each is totally interdependent on the other for its existence. Indeed, their dynamic equilibrium drives the dance of creation and destruction – life.

The opposite of push, may not be to pull, but to create a vacuum.

Creating a vacuum may also be thought of as **making space, or taking time**, into which we are drawn. In other words, allowing something to happen, rather than trying to make something happen – creating the condition or habitat for living. This path to achievement is much closer to the idea of emergence. It is, then, the act, or the art of making the **process** manifest that concerns us here, rather than the **aims**. Understanding this epistemology opens up the purpose or the potential for sustainability, and rather than trying to achieve something, or 'solve a problem', it allows us to question the issue.

Indeed, the futility of our aim becomes apparent when we see the ecology of the situation, or 'ecology in action', as the French philosopher, Edgar Morin calls it (Morin 2005). If you want to achieve something, in this case sustainability, first consider the opposite... then the question is what is sustainability? What is it for? How may it help us? And what may its consequences be? How may it emerge?

The opposite of sustainability may not be collapse, but capable futures?

And again, emergence, or the evolution of one complex system from another leads us to the concept of transdisciplnarity, but transdisciplnarity demands other conditions. In particular 'the action of the included middle', or the understanding that multiple realities exist simultaneously liberates our thinking from the limitations of binary opposites. As with the concept of Yin Yang mentioned already, the conflict between opposites is also complementary. The Romanian physicist, Basarab Nicolesu writes:

The transdisciplinary vision is resolutely open insofar as it goes beyond all the field of the exact sciences and demands their dialogue and their reconciliation with the humanities and social sciences, as well as with art, literature, poetry and spiritual experience' (Nicolescu 2002 p 149).

we must learn not to be afraid of transdisciplinarity

Much of our culture has been appropriated by the language of economics (e.g. 'ecosystem services and products'), and sustainability has become synonymous with viability. It is perhaps time to reinvent our meaning and values of sustainability. A popular desire in market economics is 'growth economy', so a potential shift in thinking to a fundamentally sustainable culture could be 'growth ecology'. I first coined the phrase in 2010 at an Asia-Europe Foundation conference in Brussels, when writing policy with a group of 'creative' individuals, on the subject of 'Sustainable Creative Cities' - 'to embrace ecological growth as social, environmental, cultural and economic diversity'

'Growth ecology' may even suggest a proliferation of economic systems, as 'growth economy' only refers to Capitalist, monetarist, market economics - a monoculture in denial of ecology. However, 'growth ecology' evokes evolutionary diversity, a principle of whole systems ecology that I would argue supersedes sustainability, or displays properties that emerge from sustainability to another level – a metaphor.

From the experientialist perspective, metaphor is a matter of *imaginative rationality*. It permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities. This should be obvious in the case of poetic metaphor, where language is the medium through which new conceptual metaphors are created. (Lakoff ,G.& Johnson, M. 1980 p. 235)

So, to conclude, a poem:

For the time being
Transformative memory
All in a lifetime

Forms of settlement
Another reality
Diverse forests

A flower waiting
Rain in a future desert
Knowing when to bloom

we must learn not to be afraid of art